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NATIONAL NUTRITION MONTH: A “WIC”KED GOOD TIME TO TALK ABOUT THE SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION PROGRAM

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Every March, the Florida Department of Health in Pinellas County (DOH-Pinellas) celebrates National Nutrition Month by providing strategies, advice and resources to help people develop sound eating habits. Thankfully for families in Pinellas, this education and support happens year-round through the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC).

The WIC program in Pinellas serves approximately 14,000 low-to-moderate income families each month. Pregnant, breastfeeding and postpartum women, infants and children younger than five years of age who are at nutrition risk receive no-cost healthy supplemental foods, as well as nutrition counseling and education, breastfeeding support and so much more.



DOH-Pinellas WIC staff rejoice after receiving a proclamation from the Pinellas County Commissioners in honor of National Nutrition Month.

Unbeknown to many, WIC benefits are not limited to food. Families who participate in the program have access to many community resources, including health screenings, immunization referrals, dental referrals, substance abuse referrals, and various other social services. The program in Pinellas works closely with the Nurse Family Partnership Program® as well as the Healthy Families® Pinellas program, which provides support to new parents through home visits via family support workers and nurses. Because of the many services provided to clients, the WIC program is a great starting point for families who are new to the community.

Nancy Rosario, a Pinellas mother of two, recalls her experience with the WIC program 20 years ago when she was a young, single mother, “This service is very important because I knew back then the struggle I had paying for formula,” said Rosario. When she became pregnant with her second child more than two years ago, she didn’t think twice about participating in WIC.

With her second child, Nancy faced unforeseen obstacles when her two-and-half year-old son, Kaeden, was diagnosed with acid reflux and a rare illness called oral aversion, a reluctance or fear of eating, drinking or accepting sensation in or around the mouth.

Over the years, Kaeden's diet consisted of a special milks and formulas that were costly and often hard for Nancy to afford. Fortunately, through the WIC program, Kaeden could receive the milk and formula he needed at no cost. "I could not imagine someone not wanting to take advantage of this program," said Rosario. "For me, I would say it was life or death. I would not have been able to afford it."

For someone who struggled to find information on oral aversion, Nancy was grateful to be able to rely on WIC both financially and emotionally. "I like that it's more individualized. I am not just a number to them or just another recipient," she said. "The staff cared and always asked about Kaeden's condition."

Without the help of the WIC program, Nancy wonders how she would have been able to afford the medical costs that piled up from all the copays for the specialists, emergency room visits and medications. "Financially, it has taken a big weight off my shoulders," she said.

Thanks to Nancy's reluctance to give up on finding ways to help Kaeden cope with the aversion, Kaeden's gastroenterologist and the help of the WIC program, Kaeden continues to transition, eating more regular foods like yogurt, cheese and purees. Anytime Nancy has questions about Kaeden's diet, WIC staff help guide her in the right direction.

Over the years, the federally funded program has proven its success. Families, like Nancy's, that have participated in WIC have overall healthier pregnancies, healthier birth outcomes and better growth and development of young children—something definitely worth celebrating this, and every, National Nutrition Month.

For more information about WIC, go to www.FloridaWIC.org.

For more information about DOH-Pinellas, go to www.PinellasHealth.com or follow us on Twitter at [@HealthyPinellas](https://twitter.com/HealthyPinellas).

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